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SUBJECT: Vietnam Supports U.S. Burma Policy Review, but Insists ASSK
Remains "too central"

REF: A) STATE 103142, B) STATE 100518, C) HANOI 851

CLASSIFIED BY: Virginia Palmer, DCM; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

11. (C) SUMMARY: Vietnam strongly supports a more "flexible" U.S. approach to Burma and is willing to facilitate contact with the Burmese regime, according to the Deputy Director General of the MFA's Southeast Asia Division, Ta Duy Chinh. Chinh asserted, however, that U.S. policy remained too focused on Aung San Suu Kyi and argued that a "flawed" election in 2010 was better than no election at all. Nevertheless -- and in a departure from standard talking points -- Chinh acknowledged that Burma's problems affected its neighbors and that ASEAN bore a measure of responsibility. Chinh confirmed that Burma's third-ranking military official, Thura Shwe Mann, would visit Hanoi, perhaps by the end of the month. END SUMMARY.

12. (SBU) On October 6, Deputy PolCouns met with the Deputy Director General for the MFA's Southeast Asia Division, Ta Duy Chinh, to urge Vietnam to use its influence with Burma -- bilaterally and through ASEAN -- to push for the release of Aung San Suu Kyi. Per ref. A, DPolCouns emphasized that while the U.S. policy review called for engagement with the Burmese regime it did not in any way signify a change in our position that ASSK should be immediately and unconditionally released. As ASEAN Chair in 2010, Vietnam should have a strong interest in ensuring that Burma's elections include significant and credible opposition participation, a difficult proposition if ASSK remained in detention.

13. (C) DDG Chinh reiterated Vietnam's strong support for the U.S. policy review (ref. B), adding that Vietnam had long argued for the United States to take a more "flexible" approach. He said that Vietnam would do what it could to facilitate contact with the Burmese regime, noting the track II channel that the MFA-affiliated Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam hoped to organize (septel). Chinh also confirmed that plans were underway for Burma's third-ranking general, Chief of General Staff Thura Shwe Mann, to visit Hanoi, perhaps by the end of the month, and offered to brief us on the meetings.

14. (C) Chinh asserted, however, that ASSK remained "too central" to U.S. thinking. Acknowledging that the terms of ASSK's confinement would seem to preclude her involvement in the election, Chinh nevertheless said that she might still be permitted to participate, provided she acknowledged that the military must maintain its central role in politics. Nevertheless, even a flawed election offered opportunities, Chinh insisted, referring to a September report by the International Crisis Group. DPolCouns countered that any such opportunities would be lost if the international community viewed the elections as lacking credibility, reiterating the need for ASSK to be released and to be permitted to participate fully if she so decided. Chinh maintained that Burma's leadership had already demonstrated some flexibility,

pointing to Senior General Tan Shwe's meeting with Senator Jim Webb, the decision to shorten ASSK's sentence, and favorable references by Shwe to ASSK's father, independence hero Aung San. Chinh said that in meetings with Burma's ambassador, he had encouraged Burma to "treat ASSK better," noting the reverence with which ordinary Burmese continued to hold her father. In a departure from Vietnam's standard line, Chinh acknowledged that Burma's problems were of concern to its neighbors, Vietnam included, and that ASEAN bore some responsibility for their resolution.

15. (C) COMMENT: DDG Chinh's remarks echoed VFM Pham Binh Minh's positive assessment of the Burma policy review that he gave to the Deputy Secretary during their September 27 meeting in Hanoi (ref. C). Chinh did not take refuge, as VFM Minh had, in Vietnam's policy of non-interference. Chinh explicitly acknowledged that Burma had problems, that these problems affected Burma's neighbors, and that ASEAN bore a measure of responsibility. The United States and Vietnam continue to have profound differences on what political stability in Burma entails and requires, and we disagree sharply on the need for ASSK to be released. Nevertheless, there is room for discussion, and Vietnam's 2010 ASEAN chairmanship gives us leverage we might not ordinarily enjoy.
Palmer